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The Value of Archives to National Park Service Historians

Most professional disciplines dealing with cultural resources focus on particular resource types. Historical architects and landscape architects exist to understand and treat historic structures and cultural landscapes. Curators acquire and manage museum objects and collections. Archeologists derive meaning from sites containing remnants of structures, objects, and other traces of human activity. Ethnographers are concerned with places and features significant to groups traditionally associated with them.

These discipline-related resource types organize the cultural resource management chapter of the National Park Service's *Management Policies* and the Service's *Cultural Resource Management Guideline* (NPS-28), which contain sections or chapters for archeological resources, cultural landscapes, historic structures, museum objects, and ethnographic resources. During the preparation of the last release of NPS-28, some National Park Service historians complained that they were being slighted. If the archeologists, architects, curators, etc., were getting chapters, why weren't they?

The chapters were not for the disciplines, they were told, but for the management of the particular resources that fall within the disciplines' purview. There is no discrete class of resources for

historians because history is not a resource-based discipline. Historians generally lack specialized expertise in performing research with, treating, and maintaining cultural resources. Although they sometimes use them in their research, their primary milieu is the written record.

While the historical architect is examining the fabric of an old house for evidence of past modifications, and the archeologist is excavating the presumed site of a vanished outbuilding to determine its location, dimensions, and other attributes, the historian will likely be using whatever archival documents he or she can find containing information about the property's ownership, improvement, occupancy, and use. Such documents may include photographs, maps, and other graphic depictions as well as written records: deeds, wills, inventories, letters, published and unpublished first-hand accounts, and so on. These primary sources pertaining to cultural resources are to historians what the resources themselves are to the other professionals.

A schoolchild assigned to do a paper on a historical topic is seldom expected to come up with new or definitive information on that topic. It is sufficient for him or her to read a few secondary sources—books, encyclopedia articles, or other accounts written by others who may or may not themselves have done primary research on the topic—and summarize or synthesize their contents. Historians also use secondary sources to discover what others have learned and concluded about historical topics, but normally as a starting point for their use of primary sources to uncover new information enabling them to re-evaluate prior conclusions and possibly reach different ones. **This archival research is what fundamentally distinguishes the professional historian from both the young student and the popular historical writer.**

It follows, then, that historians have a vested interest in the proper management and use of archives, or primary source collections. Like the archivists charged with their management, historians should be concerned that the documents are carefully preserved and handled. Historians must also be concerned that the documents are maintained in their original order, which may shed additional light on the thinking behind their cre-

The Harpers Ferry Center Library houses the NPS History Collection.



David
Nathanson,
keeper of the
NPS History
Collection.

ation; and that access to them is facilitated by inventories or other finding aids.

(Excellent guidance on handling archival documents and manuscripts is provided in *Conserve O Gram* Number 19/17, issued by the NPS Museum Management Program.) Unlike an archeological site, which once excavated no longer exists for future archeologists seeking new information with more sophisticated techniques, a properly maintained archival collection can be researched repeatedly by historians asking new questions about the topics it covers. The official records of public and private institutions and collections of personal papers are found in many repositories, including governmental archives, university libraries, and historical societies.

The National Archives. The repository probably used most often by NPS historians is the National Archives, comprising the original building in Washington, DC, the new Archives II facility in College Park, Maryland, 13 regional archives around the country, and presidential libraries for most presidents since Herbert Hoover. The National Archives, which holds the retired records of the federal government, is vital to NPS historians because so many national park system areas commemorate and interpret the activities of federal officials and agencies, from presidents to the military services to the Bureau of Immigration.

Among the federal agency records housed in the National Archives are those of the National Park Service. The NPS records, designated Record Group 79, are centered at Archives II, with smaller holdings in the regional archives in or near San Francisco, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Kansas City, Fort Worth, Atlanta, Seattle, Boston, and Chicago. In addition to correspondence and other textual records, they include still and motion pictures, maps, plans, charts, and other graphic materials. Many official records pertaining to Yellowstone National Park are retained in an "affiliated archive" under an agreement with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

NARA's web site, at <http://www.nara.gov>, contains essential information on the National Archives and its holdings, including the online version of NARA's *Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States*. For direct access to the Record Group 79 portion of this guide, enter <http://gopher.nara.gov:70/00/inform/guide/10s/rg079.txt>. Administrative and environ-



mental historians addressing the NPS, its parks, and its activities can seldom avoid research visits to one or more National Archives facilities.

The NPS History Collection. Historians will also do well to visit the NPS History Collection in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, and the NPS Historic Photo Collection in nearby Charles Town, West Virginia, both archival components of the Service's Harpers Ferry Center. The keepers of the NPS History Collection collect, inventory, and maintain many kinds of material, beyond official records subject to NARA disposition requirements, that document and illustrate the history of the NPS and its parks and may not be saved systematically elsewhere. Themes represented include development of the national park concept, the history of historic preservation, the history of interpretation, women in the NPS, park-related tourism, the Civilian Conservation Corps, park forestry, the American Revolution Bicentennial, and NPS uniforms and insignia.

The collection's contents include duplicates of selected official records, legislation, and executive orders; annual reports of secretaries of the Interior, NPS directors, and park superintendents. Also included are reports of official conferences and staff meetings; master plans and interpretive prospectuses; interpretive and informational publications; personal papers of, biographical data on, and transcripts of interviews with NPS officials and park supporters; as well as NPS uniforms, badges, and other artifacts. Further information about the collection can be obtained by calling 304-535-6262.

The NPS Historic Photo Collection encompasses about 100,000 images dating from 1890 to the present, including those by official NPS photographers from 1929 to 1980. Illustrating many of the topics covered in the NPS History Collection, they are also valuable primary sources for park

Tom DuRant,
Keeper of the
NPS Historic
Photo Collection.

historians. More information about this collection is available on 304-535-6707.

Repository Overview. It would be impossible to list all the archival repositories useful to NPS historians because their research interests are so wide-ranging. At the risk of slighting many equally relevant ones, only a few more will be mentioned here.

Director's Papers. Papers of 10 NPS directors, sometimes limited to the desk files they kept during their directorships, are in four university libraries in addition to Archives II.

- The University of California at Berkeley holds papers of Stephen T. Mather.
- The University of California at Los Angeles holds papers of Horace M. Albright.
- Clemson University holds papers of Russell E. Dickenson, George B. Hartzog, Jr., William Penn Mott, Jr., and Ronald H. Walker.
- The University of Wyoming holds papers of Arthur E. Demaray and Conrad L. Wirth.
- Archives II holds papers of Arno B. Cammerer and Newton B. Drury and other papers of Albright and Wirth within Record Group 79.

The Denver Public Library's Conservation Library has numerous collections on its topic, including papers of the Nature Conservancy and the Wilderness Society.

The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in Harrisburg holds the papers of J. Horace McFarland, a leading proponent of the National Park Service as president of the American Civic Association in the first decades of the 20th century.

The University of Maryland's McKeldin Library contains the National Trust for Historic Preservation Library, which houses records of the National Trust and a major collection on preservation including the papers of Frederick L. Rath, Jr., and interviews by preservation historian Charles B. Hosmer, Jr.

Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site preserves the extensive records of the landscape architecture firm founded by Olmsted and continued by his sons. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., participated in the creation of the National Park Service and shaped many park landscapes.

The Library of Congress holds the papers of many early presidents beginning with George Washington. It also holds the papers of Booker T. Washington, Harold L. Ickes, and numerous other



noted figures. It is also the repository for the documentation produced by the Service's Historic American Buildings Survey and Historic American Engineering Record.

A personal experience exemplifies the value of archives to NPS historians re-examining accepted interpretations of the past. George Washington Carver, whom the NPS is charged with interpreting at George Washington Carver National Monument and Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site (where he taught under Booker T. Washington), has been widely credited with creating hundreds of new products from peanuts. Carver's work stimulated peanut production and freed southern agriculture from dependence on cotton.

Research in the Carver papers at Tuskegee, the Booker T. Washington papers in the Library of Congress, and contemporary agricultural publications and production records at the National Agricultural Library revealed that few of Carver's "discoveries" were new or commercially viable. Even more interestingly, peanut production peaked before Carver became popularly associated with the crop.

The NPS could legitimately present Carver as a noted teacher and humanitarian, but not as a scientific pioneer who transformed the South's economy. Of course, appealing historical myths die hard—a new poster in the Service's history office in Washington featuring noted African Americans pictures Carver with the caption "Revolutionized agriculture in the South"!

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Photos courtesy NPS Historic Photo Collection.